



Meet Madonna Soctomah and David Francis

Madonna Soctomah

Madonna Soctomah’s passion is the Passamaquoddy language—hearing it, teaching it and speaking it. Born and raised on the Sipayik Reservation at Pleasant Point, Madonna spoke only Passamaquoddy until age five when she began attending St. Ann’s Catholic School. She later went to Shead High School in nearby Eastport, where she found herself speaking less and less of her beloved Native language and more and more English. After high school, she attended college in Bangor, and then traveled around the world to places as far away as Beijing, China. One day, while living in Hawaii, far away from Maine, Madonna’s phone rang. When she picked it up and said hello, Madonna heard something she had not heard in years—the sound of her Native language, being spoken by a Passamaquoddy friend visiting Hawaii. It brought tears to her eyes!

Since then, Madonna has worked for many years within and for her community. She has been a health administrator at the Pleasant Point and Indian Township health centers, a member of tribal council, and has served as the Passamaquoddy tribal representative to the Maine State Legislature. Now that she is retired, Madonna works on projects close to her heart: teaching the Passamaquoddy language. One of her current interests is the “Passamaquoddy Transformers Theater,” a drama group that creates interactive plays about Passamaquoddy language and culture.

David Francis

David Francis may be a quiet man, but he certainly has a lot to say—and he can say it in more than one language. How did Mr. Francis become interested in language? Sixty years ago, a young David Francis joined the U.S. Army to fight in World War II. He was a Native Passamaquoddy speaker with little experience speaking English. Mr. Francis describes his time in the Army as five years “with no one to speak [Passamaquoddy] to.”

However, Mr. Francis went on to master another language in the Army—Morse code, which he used during the frequent power outages to send important communications for food, water and ammunition.

Thirty years ago, Mr. Francis took a language class at the University of New Brunswick with a linguist named Robert Leavitt. This class marked an important partnership between the two men. Today, they are the co-editors-in-chief of the Maliseet-Passamaquoddy dictionary, a 30,000-word dictionary of the Passamaquoddy-Maliseet language. A condensed, on-line version of the dictionary will link words to sound files of a Native speaker pronouncing the words.

For the past 12 years, Mr. Francis has been compiling, editing and recording words in his Native language, Passamaquoddy. You can usually find him behind his computer at the Wapohnahki Museum and Resource Center at Sipayik, where he works daily editing the dictionary.